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Buffalo's Community Bicycle Workshop

Abstract

The "CBW" is a cooperative learning workshop that provides a facility, tools, and education to those interested in bicycles. The workshop provides affordable bicycles and a free place to learn and thus increases bicycle awareness. The CBW is a program of Green Options Buffalo, which promotes biking, walking, public transit, and other healthy and sustainable transportation options. The CBW refurbishes and sells roughly 109 bicycles per year for an average of \$85 a piece, and it donates many free bicycles as well. The CBW is staffed by one part-time shop manager (paid \$12.75 per hour), one full-time AmeriCorps member, and a number of volunteers.

Keywords

Buffalo, Environment, Transit, Report, PPG, PDF

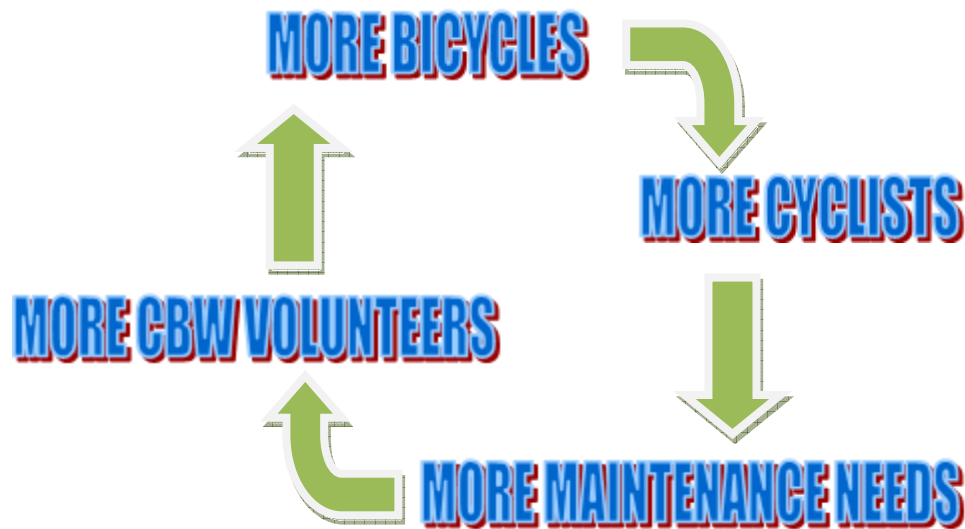
Buffalo's Community Bicycle Workshop

Marshall Bertram



What is the Community Bicycle Workshop?

The “CBW” is a cooperative learning workshop that provides a facility, tools, and education to those interested in bicycles.¹ The workshop provides affordable bicycles and a free place to learn and thus increases bicycle awareness. The CBW is a program of Green Options Buffalo, which promotes biking, walking, public transit, and other healthy and sustainable transportation options. The CBW refurbishes and sells roughly 109 bicycles per year for an average of \$85 a piece, and it donates many free bicycles as well.² The CBW is staffed by one part-time shop manager (paid \$12.75 per hour), one full-time AmeriCorps member, and a number of volunteers.³



The CBW functions as a positive feedback system: the shop introduces a greater number of bicycles into the community. Greater bicycle availability means more people putting more miles on bicycles. This leads to a need for more bicycle maintenance. People wind up at CBW because of (1) a need for affordable bicycle repair or (2) a desire to learn to “do it yourself.” The shop then gets more volunteers. The volunteers produce more bicycles. This cycle repeats itself, all the while increasing the number of cyclists and bicycle awareness.

How did the Community Bicycle Workshop start?

The CBW has its roots in two programs of Green Options Buffalo (“GO-Buffalo”): the “Recycle-a-Bicycle” program, which is still running today, and Buffalo Blue Bicycle, which ended last Spring.⁴ The Recycle-a-Bicycle program works with kids from local schools to teach them bicycle repair, provide them a bicycle they fixed up themselves during the semester, and impart a little math and science along the way.⁵

Buffalo Blue Bicycle was a first-generation bike-share program, in which old bicycles fixed up at the CBW would be placed at certain “hubs” throughout the city, borrowed for a short time, and then returned to one of these hubs.⁶ Anyone who fixed a bicycle for Blue Bicycle was then allowed to use the shop and its resources to work on their own bicycles. Buffalo Blue Bicycle is no longer operating, but may be replaced by a more hi-tech bike-share program, such as Social Bicycles.⁷

How is the CBW funded?

The CBW is currently self-sustaining.⁸ It makes money by selling repaired bicycles and salvaged parts, and through fundraisers, such as the Tour de Farms put on with the Massachusetts Avenue Project.⁹ Funding is also provided by selling GO-Buffalo memberships, which, among other things, give members full access to use the CBW.¹⁰

When it first opened, the CBW struggled with making money by selling bicycles and spare parts. Those sales pay a major part of the bills today. As of mid-October, 2011, the workshop has sold \$15,000 worth of bicycles and parts.¹¹

Approximately 175 of the 300 GO-Buffalo memberships have been purchased at the CBW.¹² This brings in another \$4,375 in funding.¹³ Fundraisers also bring in around \$10,000 per year, but this is dispersed among all arms of GO-Buffalo.¹⁴



What are some of the costs of the CBW?

The CBW estimates insurance costs are about \$1,700 per year.¹⁵ This covers liability for any accident that might occur, in or out of the shop. Funds also pay for a part-time shop manager, costing a little more than \$13,000 per year.¹⁶

The CBW has to purchase any equipment that cannot be salvaged from other bicycles. Items such as grease, degreaser, chains, brake cables, etc. have to be purchased.¹⁷ The shop also has to buy some tools, but many are donated or left over from programs the CBW runs..¹⁸ Funds go toward special events, programs, and promotions, and also provide for GO-Buffalo's ongoing bicycle/pedestrian policy work.¹⁹

One of the biggest hurdles was finding a facility for the CBW.²⁰ The organization got lucky when the City of Buffalo agreed to provide an old police precinct building on the corner of Colvin and Linden Avenues and to pay the utilities.²¹ Although the city keeps costs low in this location, the CBW is looking to move to another location, possibly on Buffalo's west side, in order to be more accessible to the people served.²²

Where does the CBW get its old bicycles?

The CBW gets its bicycles from many sources. In its infancy, the CBW found bicycles by digging them out of the trash. Now, the CBW receives the majority of its bicycles from individual donations.²³ Because GO-Buffalo is a non-profit, these donations are tax-deductible.²⁴ Organized donations also make up a large part of their intake.

Institutions such as the University at Buffalo and Buffalo State College have policies to donate bicycles that remain unclaimed.²⁵ In the past, these have been donated to the CBW for repair and reuse.²⁶ The Kenmore Police Department and the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning have also donated unclaimed bicycles.²⁷ The CBW has received as many as 400 bikes at once from these organizational donations.²⁸

What programs does the CBW run to provide bicycles to people who need them?



The Recycle-a-Bicycle program provides education and bicycles to students in Buffalo.²⁹ The CBW works with Baker Victory Services, Bennett Park Montessori, Big Brother Big Sister, the Buffalo Youth Hostel, Enterprise Charter School, Harvey Austin Middle School, the Massachusetts Avenue Project, North Park Middle Academy, and Buffalo Public Schools 18, 27 and 77.³⁰

So far over 1,200 students have learned about bicycle repair, safety, and its impact on the environment, as well as math and physics through an interesting, hands-on approach.³¹

The CBW also gives away bicycles to communities that need them most. Each winter, the CBW staff fix thirty to forty bicycles and donate them to refugees at Hope Refugee Services or Journey's End, recently released inmates, and other people in need.³² This not only promotes bicycling in Buffalo, but also provides transportation to those who lack cars.



Does the CBW do anything to promote bicycle safety?

The CBW would like to get more involved with promoting safety directly out of the shop, but providing helmets in the same manner as they provide bicycles is difficult.³³ A helmet is no longer usable after one impact.³⁴ This means any donated helmets have to be brand new due to safety requirements. So the “refurbishing old to become new” model the CBW takes with bicycles does not work with helmets. Low- or no-cost helmets are also difficult to come by.³⁵

GO-Buffalo’s membership includes “bicycle benefits,” which reward you with discounts at many local shops, restaurants, and bars when you wear your helmet.³⁶ “Biketoberfest,” an annual event sponsored by GO-Buffalo at Essex Street Pub, rewards those who bring their helmet with discounted admission.³⁷

The Tour de Farms of Buffalo’s urban gardens encourages riders to come to a pre-event workshop event. The staff and volunteers at the CBW help riders to tune their bikes up while giving safety tips for the coming ride.

¹ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 11, 2011.

² Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 20, 2011

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- ³ Id.
⁴ Id.
⁵ Id.
⁶ Id.
⁷ Id.; Social Bicycles, “How It Works,” <http://socialbicycles.com/pages/how-it-works>.
⁸ Id.
⁹ “Local News Briefs,” Buffalo News, 16 September 2011.
¹⁰ Green Options Buffalo, “Become a Member,” <http://greenoptionsbuffalo.org/join.php>.
¹¹ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 20, 2011.
¹² Id.
¹³ Id.
¹⁴ Id.
¹⁵ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 11, 2011.
¹⁶ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 20, 2011.
¹⁷ Green Options Buffalo, “Community Bicycle Workshop: FAQs,” <http://greenoptionsbuffalo.org/programs.php?recordID=6>.
¹⁸ Id.
¹⁹ Id.
²⁰ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 11, 2011.
²¹ Id.
²² Id.
²³ Id.
²⁴ Green Options Buffalo, “Community Bicycle Workshop,” <http://greenoptionsbuffalo.org/programs.php?recordID=6>.
²⁵ UB Parking, Bicycle Policies, <http://www.ub-parking.buffalo.edu/bike.php>.
²⁶ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 11, 2011.
²⁷ Id.
²⁸ Id.
²⁹ Green Options Buffalo, “Recycle-a-Bicycle,” <http://greenoptionsbuffalo.org/programs.php?recordID=4>.
³⁰ Id.
³¹ Id.
³² Id.
³³ Id.
³⁴ Id.
³⁵ Id.
³⁶ Green Options Buffalo, “Bicycle Benefits,” <http://greenoptionsbuffalo.org/programs.php?recordID=10>.
³⁷ Personal communication with Justin Booth, October 11, 2011.

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